

Uncovering the potential of urban culture for creative placemaking

Banoyi Zuma and Margo Rooijackers

Abstract

Purpose – The authors provide a personal insight into how they see the potential of urban culture as a vehicle for creative placemaking. The purpose of this study is to highlight the opportunities for the tourism industry to embrace this global youth culture now that one of its pillars, breakdance, is on the brink of becoming an Olympic discipline in 2024, thus nudging this youth culture from underground to mainstream.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors interviewed two Dutch pioneers in the field of urban culture: Tyrone van der Meer, founder of The Notorious IBE (IBE), an international breaking event, and Angelo Martinus, founder of the urban scene in Eindhoven and initiator of EMOVES, an urban culture and sports event.

Findings – The authors illustrate the added value of urban culture to creative placemaking by addressing the initiatives of previously mentioned Dutch pioneers. Their urban culture events on Dutch soil, yearly attract thousands of participants and visitors from the urban scene, covering over 40 nationalities, to the South of The Netherlands.

Originality/value – This study provides a glimpse into a global youth culture that is primarily invisible to the tourism industry and a foresight in how the tourism industry and other stakeholders (e.g. policy makers, city marketeers, tourism managers and event organisers) can pick up on this evolving trend. The study is meant as a wake-up call.

Keywords Trends, Creative tourism, Event tourism, Destination marketing, Creative placemaking, Urban culture, Placemaking, Urban culture events, Hiphop, Breakdance

Paper type Research paper

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Introduction

Bicycle motocross or bike motocross (BMX) was recognised as an Olympic discipline in 2008, skateboarding will follow in 2020 and breakdance is in the run for obtaining Olympic status in 2024. Now that the exposure of these manifestations of the urban culture increases, a further shift of urban culture from underground to mainstream is to be expected. This mainstreaming brings opportunities and challenges. Through two case studies, we illustrate the potential for and added value of urban arts by positioning it as a driver for creative and strategic placemaking. We conclude with a wake-up call for stakeholders (e.g. tourism managers, policy makers, city marketeers and event organisers).

Using mobile interviews (during the IBE 2019 event in Heerlen) of two of the leading voices in the field of urban arts events, we gained an insider's perspective on the potential of urban arts for the tourism industry, policy making and other affiliated sectors. By linking creative placemaking to a global youth culture, we made sense of societal trends and developments and opened up new avenues for development.

Creative placemaking

Although the first placemaking projects and definitions date back to the 1970s (Dupre, 2019), there is yet no consensus on its conceptualisation. However, what binds the different

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conceptualisations is the fact that they are all concerned with the process of producing spaces (Healey, 2001 in (Franz *et al.*, 2008)). Here, placemaking is defined based on Fürst *et al.* (as quoted in (Franz *et al.*, 2008, p. 323)) as *“a collective process of space arrangement with the aim to advance the usage and living quality of a space and to appropriate the space in a socio-emotional way”* by adding meaning to users of a space and thus changing it into a quality place [Dovey, 1991; Winikoff, 1995 are quoted by (Franz *et al.*, 2008)] *“[...] people want to live, work, play and learn in”* (Wyckoff, 2014, p. 2). The scale on which placemaking occurs varies from neighbourhood to state level (Markusen and Gadwa, 2010). Our working definition of creative placemaking is then the process by which *“partners from public, private, non-profit, and community sectors strategically shape the physical and social character of a neighbourhood, town, city, or region around arts and cultural activities”* (Markusen and Gadwa, 2010, p. 3). Creative placemaking uses the power of art and culture to serve the interests of the community by grounding place-based strategies in the assets and needs of that particular community and consequently brings about a transformation of the space in such a manner that it contributes to the character and quality of the place (Artscape, 2019). This *“animates public and private spaces, rejuvenates structures and streetscapes, improves local business viability and public safety, and brings diverse people together to celebrate, inspire and be inspired”* (Markusen and Gadwa, 2010, p. 3). Using (creative) placemaking (Androutsopoulos and Scholz, 2003), authorities can add meaning to certain neighbourhoods, cities or regions such that residents feel a stronger connection to that particular location, which has a positive effect on their perception of that place. Dutch cities such as Heerlen and Eindhoven apply creative placemaking by blending the DNA of the city with urban culture and stimulating the development of facilities and artistic expressions related to the urban lifestyle. What binds creative placemaking and urban culture expressions is the fact that they are both concerned with identity construction. While (creative) placemaking is about creating an identity for a certain space, a manifestation as breaking, as breakdance is called in the scene, *“involves a process of continuous identity construction, in which adopting and internalizing the subculture’s ideas, objects and practices is crucial”* (Langnes and Fasting, 2014, p. 55).

Urban culture

Urban culture originated in the streets of New York City in the mid-1970s. In the early 1980s, The Netherlands was one of the first European countries to embrace this culture. What started in the USA as an emancipation movement arising from deprivation has grown into a global youth culture in almost 40 years (Androutsopoulos and Scholz, 2003). The various musical, visual, physical and creative expressions such as breaking, mc-ing, dj-ing, hiphop music, rap and graffiti exemplify urban culture (Ards, 2004). In the 21st century, urban culture is synonymous with the creative and artistic lifestyle of segments of people from all different layers in society with diverse ethnic backgrounds (Pough, 2004; HIJS, 2009; Kunstfactor, 2011). In recent years, urban culture was anchored in the cultural policy of Dutch municipalities and regions.

Urban Heerlen: the Notorious IBE

Tyrone van der Meer (founder of The Notorious IBE):

Breaking, mc-ing, writing and dj-ing are the original elements of hiphop culture. Through the years the individual hiphop elements broadened and deepened. This renewal, as designed by every new generation, creates new elements that cannot always be described entirely as belonging to the hiphop culture. Nonetheless these new expressions are built on the shared principles of hiphop culture, namely “each one teach one”, “do it yourself” and “real recognise real”. The broader term “urban” was used for the first time in the music industry to frame black hiphop, R&B and dancehall (Stapele, 2005). Van der Meer: “In the late 90s “urban culture”

became the politically correct umbrella term for black/Caribbean/African culture in the Netherlands.

Annually, Heerlen became the platform of the international urban scene during the IBE breaking event. Thousands of visitors from over 40 countries land for three days in the city center to enjoy dance, music and culture together with the local population (Erp, 2018; Heerlen, 2019). Although creating a clean and safe center was the city's priority previously, the city's focus has been on inviting people to visit the revitalised city center, amongst others, by facilitating events with an urban character and an international reach such as The Notorious IBE since 2006 (Heerlen, 2017).

Van der Meer:

Heerlen is not the first city where you'd expect a breaking event with international dancers and visitors but through the years the city evolved into the place to be in August. Thousands of young people from around the world with caps and sneakers interact with each other and with Heerlen's citizens, although at first it took some getting used to. Nowadays during IBE hotels in Heerlen are packed.

The breaking event is a collaboration between the IBE organization, the municipality of Heerlen, the business community, local retailers, visitors as well as volunteers from (the region of) Heerlen who support the event and want to be part of the vibe the event creates.

Van der Meer:

Heerlen has become a leading city in the field of urban arts, with a lively underground rap scene and spectacular murals by, among others, the world-renowned Brazilian graffiti duo Pandolfo, aka as Osgemeos. The "twins" started out as breakers, but over the years shifted their focus to graffiti. Their works can be found in galleries and on buildings in various world cities such as London, Paris, New York, Sao Paulo and Tokyo. And also, in Heerlen, which together with the other murals and graffiti attracts many visitors to the city throughout the year.

Urban Eindhoven: EMOVES

In Eindhoven, creative placemaking and strategic placemaking go hand-in-hand. The term strategic placemaking is used when major investments are done that serve as catalyst for redefining a neighbourhood or city to attract new investors [Shaw and Montana, 2016 in (Lew, 2017)]. Such places can develop into tourist destinations (Lew, 2017). Strijp S in Eindhoven is an example of such a place. The old industrial Philips buildings were transformed into incubators for creativity.

Angelo Martinus (founder of the urban scene in Eindhoven and initiator of EMOVES):

We started in the attic in a neighbourhood center in 2001. As a youth worker, I created a space for youngsters and supported them in their creative ambitions. When in 2007 the youth center became too small, the breakers, producers, rappers and film-makers eventually moved to an empty factory building at Strijp-S in 2011. This creative and cultural center of Eindhoven generated various urban culture initiatives, among which the event Emoves.

EMOVES, a collaboration between three^[1] large urban culture and sports institutions, emerged in 2011 as an offspring of Eindhoven's ambition to become Europe's Capital of Culture in 2018 in which urban culture would be one of its pillars.

In 2019, the eighth edition of EMOVES harboured disciplines such as breaking, skateboarding, free-running, dj-ing, graffiti and BMX. Over the years, EMOVES transformed from a festival into a platform that supports and strengthens urban initiatives in Eindhoven and attracts yearly thousands of international visitors.

Martinus:

Young people have never been as mobile and in contact with each other as they are nowadays. Cheap airline tickets, good public transport and the internet ensure that the whole world is within reach. Surprisingly, international urban event visitors often only know Eindhoven and Heerlen. They are hardly aware of the rest of the country, while The Netherlands have so much more to offer. Urban event visitors choose the airport that is closest to the event. These visitors are mainly concerned with meeting like-minded people at the event, but also around a certain topic. Via social media they inform each other about interesting spots, e.g. for free-running or skateboarding. The province of Noord-Brabant offers 7 skate parks, with Area51 in Eindhoven being the largest of the Benelux. A skateboarder could easily spend days in Brabant enjoying himself or herself. And due to the size of the Netherlands and the excellent public transportation, traveling from one location to the other is effortless. With all that the Netherlands has to offer, it shouldn't be too complicated to put together an appealing tourist package for this segment.

What the tourist sector needs to consider is that the urban event visitor is not your usual hotel guest.

Martinus:

Urban culture comes with tattoos, shirts, caps, sneakers, backpacks and many different nationalities. This group sometimes has special wishes. For example, BMX riders want to take their bikes to their rooms. This can lead to discussions with hotel staff, but afterwards we often get back from the hotels that no group is so modest and nice as those guys from the urban scene.

Wake-up call

Contemporary developments and the potential for creative placemaking were illustrated through the presentations of two cases. This study shows that space matters: not the constructed spaces created by architects, but the space created by people. The collectivity of people, that is the space (Sandig, 2014). Now that manifestations of the urban arts are (becoming) Olympic disciplines, a further shift of urban culture from underground to the mainstream is to be expected. This mainstreaming brings opportunities and challenges for the tourism industry. On the one hand, urban culture can aid spreading seasonality by attracting tourists outside the listed events. Artistic expressions such as the murals and street art in both Heerlen and Eindhoven, Skatepark Area 51 and Dynamo in Eindhoven attract visitors, photographers, artists, athletes and dancers from all over the world all year round. However, incorporating urban culture into the veins of a city needs careful planning. Because the urban arts events draw international crowds, it is of the utmost importance that locals do not feel disfranchised. Involving locals at an early stage is imperative for invoking feelings of ownership. The locals need to be duly represented in the event. Simultaneously, it is important for tourism managers, city marketers, event organisers, policy makers and other stakeholders to acknowledge that capitalizing on these opportunities by designing innovative product market combinations inspired by the urban lifestyle can only happen along with representatives from the scene. Only then can the full potential of urban culture for creative placemaking be reached.

Note

1. Dynamo (UrbanLab040), Area51 Skatepark and The Ruggeds.

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